

# The Truth of Sorcery

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The anthropological study of witchcraft in the colonial period centered on functionalism and the revelation of conflict. Recent African studies in particular have revealed new dimensions of witchcraft, no longer confined to localities but located in the state and in the international economy. Witchcraft, it is clear, has not declined with independence and development; it has, rather, flourished in unexpected ways and entwined itself in political action and political thinking.<sup>1</sup> The study of how this happened belongs to the ethnography and the history of particular cases. Such study, however, is not intended to reveal the nature of witchcraft as an institution, if it is that. Rather, one must return to earlier studies that look at the phenomenon in general. In the discussion below, I have picked out the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss because it seems to me they offer the strongest arguments and because certain of their assumptions and conclusions are now embedded in our thinking in ways that bear reexamination.

Lévi-Strauss in his famous essay "The Sorcerer and His Magic" retells a case from Zuni Pueblo. A young man accused of witchcraft confesses to the accusation after first denying it. Zuni put witches to death. In this case, Lévi-Strauss tells us, the man is let go because he gives his accusers "the satisfaction of truth which they prefer to justice." With his confession, witchcraft and associated ideas "cease to exist as a diffuse complex of poorly formulated sentiments and representations and become embodied in real experience" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:174).<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss's assumption is that witchcraft beliefs are not ideas. They are vague assumptions that are impossible to articulate under ordinary circumstances. When there is suspicion of sorcery, the accused makes evident by his confession what otherwise was only vaguely sensed. It is a question of articulation, of bringing into language, and particularly of bringing into speech, something that until that time was merely guess, sentiment, and suspicion. It is equally a question of restoring coherence to social life that has been upset by feeling a general malaise or threat.

From a certain perspective, the possibility of speaking itself would be reaffirmed by sorcery trials. When one is haunted by whatever it is that needs articulation but cannot be said convincingly, all of speech risks sounding hollow. The "truth" of sorcery presumably lies in the transformation that occurs between inchoate feelings and the delimitation of these in such a way that they are tellable.

Sorcery in this view is no longer superstition. Not that it is justified by its social functions, as it has been in anthropology since the 1930s at least. Rather, as a place from which articulation takes shape, it is a source of truth. Of course, this is Zuni truth, but because it concerns the articulation of ideas via communal action, it has general implications. Without sorcerers, not only would there be no one to blame, there would be no way to bring into consciousness whatever it is that unconsciously presses for expression. Sorcery becomes the lifting of the barriers to expression. It furnishes both a means of locating truth—in the sorcerer via his confession—and an instrument of articulation as he, the sorcerer, speaks what not merely the victim of his sorcery but the community cannot say.

The expression of truth is satisfying; guilt is secondary. Thus, rational discussion of the causes of whatever misfortune is involved, necessarily with the expression of different opinions, has no place. Lévi-Strauss describes the operations of what, thanks to Jacques Derrida, we know as phallogocentrism. Although it seems at first that our notions of justice are upset—a man is about to be executed on the basis of suspicion alone—Lévi-Strauss validates these operations by showing that the giving of a voice to the community gives a coherence to social life that results in the forgetting of the man's crime. In the end, their justice might suffer, but ours does not.

There is never any doubt about the "facts" in the minds of the youth's accusers. He certainly bewitched the girl. However, "proof" is necessary. Proof of what? The boy confesses twice. The first time is insufficient. His accusers do not accept his statement. They require more detail. He must "validate a system of which they possess only a fragment," says Lévi-Strauss (1963:167). When, finally, the youth says that his powers are due to magical plumes, they require him to produce them. He rips out a portion of the walls of his mother's house before he finds one. Lévi-Strauss used the account of Matilda Coxe Stevenson for his analysis. He quotes Stevenson to describe this moment: "There was consternation among the warriors, who exclaimed in one voice, 'What does this mean?' Now they felt assured that the youth had spoken the truth" (1904:173).

Here is the moment of "truth." What they already believed is confirmed. However, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, the confirmation produces consternation rather than triumph. They did not mean "proof of a crime" but rather "witness to the reality of the system which had made the crime possible." This they get by "validating its objective basis through an appropriate emotional expression." The "truth," then, is not confirmation that an act was performed—that in particular, the girl was ensorcelled. It is rather an "expression," in fact, "an appropriate emotional expression." Usually we are astonished by finding out what we do not know. They look for evidence of what they believe and they are astonished at getting it. This is because they are unsure of its meaning: "What does this mean?" are their words. When they find what they are looking for, it is a fact so large, so incomprehensible, that they are upset. It is a truth that they know but do not have the ability to say; for that, they need a sorcerer, and so they manufacture one themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Why are they speechless? What are they defending themselves against? What is so horrible to say? Pain, of course, produces speechlessness. We know this, for instance, in our notion of trauma. The traumatized person can say what happened to him, but saying it does nothing for him. It does not put the event behind him in a past defined as prior to the moment of speaking. Lévi-Strauss (1963) deals with this in the companion essay to the piece we are discussing, "The Effectiveness of Symbols." There, he describes a woman in childbirth who can only suffer her pain. A shaman recites an epic that describes a passage through the woman's body. When he finishes, she gives birth. "The cure would consist in making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:197). The shaman, says Lévi-Strauss,

provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is this transition to this verbal expression—at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible—which induces the release of the physiological process. [1963:198]

"Language" (the French is *langage* [Lévi-Strauss 1958:218]) here marks "a transition to verbal expression." In "The Sorcerer and His Magic" Lévi-Strauss has an equivalent formulation. He says that "the patient is all passivity and self-alienation, just as inexpressibility is the disease of the mind. The sorcerer is activity and self-projection, just as affectivity is the source of symbolism. The cure interrelates these opposite poles" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:182). So out of "chaos" (Lévi-Strauss's word) comes "the coherence of the psychic universe" (again his words). The central element of both curing as well as sorcery in Lévi-Strauss's accounts is the ability to form speech.

Lévi-Strauss in making his analysis draws on the work of Mauss on magic. "Imagine for a moment if you possibly can," Mauss asks of his readers,

a sick Australian aborigine who calls in a sorcerer. [The sorcerer dances. "falls into a cataleptic fit" and, when he returns, extracts a pebble from the sick person.] Obviously there are two subjective experiences involved in these facts. And between the dreams of one and the desires of the other there is a discordant factor. Apart from the sleight of hand at the end, the magician makes no effort to make his ideas coincide with the ideas and need of his client. [Mauss 1972:123]

Nonetheless, "magic consists in uniting the two" (1972:123). Lévi-Strauss, in "The Effectiveness of Symbols," elaborated and modified this idea, showing how the curer supplies the speech lacking in the suffering patient. Lévi-Strauss explicates the logic of this union in psychoanalytic terms. He explains how the curer becomes the voice of the patient and thus ultimately restores her voice. Mauss himself put his argument in Durkheimian terms (it is a question of social belief), but he also relied on Kant and on grammatical categories. "The magician, they say, reasons from like to like by applying the law of sympathy, thinking in terms of his powers or his auxiliary spirits. The rite causes the spirits to work, by definition" (1972:122).

The “they” of the first sentence refers to Frazer and his famous laws of magic. (Mauss argues against Frazer off and on throughout the book, without naming him. He is always subtle in his opposition, preferring not to engage him directly. Thus his criticisms of Durkheim usually come in the middle of the paragraph, with the conclusion sustaining Durkheim, his uncle.) Mauss sees Frazer as describing magical laws as Kantian analytic judgments. Analytic judgments are true by definition. (They are, Kant tells us, judgments in which “the predicate B belongs to the subject A as something which is (covertly) contained in this concept A” [Kant 1929:48]. For example: All bachelors are unmarried.) Mauss sees Frazer not through the vast collection of cases that fill the 12 volumes of *The Golden Bough* but through the structure of the two proposals that the very numerous examples illustrate. Thus, things once in touch remain in touch. A law for Frazer, true by definition, is not really a law, Mauss says. If Frazer were correct, everything that bears resemblance to something else would be thought to be the same, and everything that was once in touch would be thought to remain in touch. However, this is not so. It is not a matter of analytic judgments but of social conventions. These conventions pick out only certain objects that remain in touch with or resemble others that they influence. If they are not analytic judgments, they must be synthetic judgments. Synthetic judgments are all those judgments in which the predicate is not contained in the subject. “Judgments of experience, as such, are one and all synthetic,” Kant says (1929:49). For Mauss, magical judgments are expressions of social conventions applied to experience. As synthetic judgments they are dependent on testing in the world.

This testing is problematic because it is prejudicial (Kant 1929:124). Still, testing is necessary because of the nature of synthetic judgments. To be known to be true they have to be demonstrated, and the demonstration has recourse to the world. Thus, for instance, that  $7 + 5 = 12$  appears to many to be an analytic judgment, but, says Kant, the principle that unites  $7 + 5$  to make 12 can never be shown without recourse to the world. “We have to go outside these concepts, and call in the aide of the intuition which corresponds to one of them, our five fingers” (1929:53). Whatever makes people believe in the truth of arithmetic and yet count on their fingers to make sure is the same as what makes them believe in magic and yet want it demonstrated in the world.

Mauss moves from his allusions to Kant to the objectivization of experience. If people can objectivize their experience, which in particular includes the ability to relate it, it is because society gives them terms outside of themselves with which to do so.

It is this belief (the universal belief in magic) which allows people to objectivize their subjective ideas and generalize individual illusions. Again, it is this belief which gives magical judgments their affirmative, inevitable and absolute character. In brief, while they exist in the minds of individuals, magical judgments, even from the outset, are—as we have pointed out—well nigh perfect, a priori, synthetic judgments. The terms are connected before any kind of testing. [Mauss 1972:124]

Mauss says that magical beliefs are founded on the world, not on thought or definition; they are synthetic judgments in that sense, but they are special ones because they are embedded in belief. No experience is likely to change them. "All over the world, magical judgments existed prior to magical experience. Experiences occur only in order to confirm them and almost never succeed in refuting them." Still, he adds, they need testing of a certain sort: "It must be made clear that we have no wish to imply that magic does not demand analysis or testing. We are only saying that it is poorly analytical, poorly experiential and almost entirely *a priori*" (Mauss 1972:124). Thus, the transformation of suffering into coherent expression comes via belief. But this does not mean that the connection is in any way automatic.

"What, then, operates this synthesis?" It cannot be done by the individual. There has to be "collective confirmation," and this has to be supported by "at least two persons—the magician performing the rite and the individual who believes in it" (Mauss 1972:124), or in the case of folk magic, the single person who practices it and the one who taught him to do so. Social belief in magic thus furnishes the terms in which suffering can be externalized; communal participation more or less follows from this as the means to confirm the validity of the terms of judgment. The "testing" that is called for does not have the aim of seeing whether the terms are valid or not. It "tests" only to confirm. Magical judgments, which Mauss terms *prejudicial*, are rarely contradicted by evidence. Such evidence is ignored as with all prejudice. Testing is called for merely because the terms apply to the world and are thought to be founded in it. We are not yet at the point made by Lévi-Strauss where testing is the point where articulation occurs.

In Mauss, the "operation" of magic has to take place. There must be a rite, but it is not clear just why. Indeed, if magical judgments were analytic, the need for ritual would be even less obvious. At one point, Mauss says that "there has never been, in fact, any need to operate it. Magical judgments arise in the form of prejudice and prescription" (Mauss 1972:124). He means that it is strange that even though the prejudice of magical belief is so firmly established that evidence can rarely contradict it, there is, nonetheless, testing and ritual. In *A General Theory of Magic*, Mauss considers many kinds of magical rituals. However, in the conclusion, it is curing rites that implicitly sum up the power of magic. We imagine the sorcerer returning from trance and the passive sick person. The paradigmatic "synthesis" occurs between the two of them. "Obviously there are two subjective experiences involved in these facts. And between the dreams of one and the desires of the other there is a discordant factor," to quote these two important lines again. The conjunction comes magically, and Mauss perceives this magic in the mind of the magician. "His judgments always involve a heterogeneous term, which is irreducible to any logical analysis. This term is force or power or mana" (1972:122). We will come back to the nature of this force and what it has to do with articulation. First we must return to the Zuni incident.

## II

Lévi-Strauss, we have said, drew on the account of Matilda Coxe Stevenson for his Zuni example. Stevenson was the wife of the leader of the Bureau of American Ethnology expedition to Zuni and the rival of her colleague on this expedition, Frank Cushing. (Cushing stayed on when the expedition left and is sometimes named as the inventor of participant-observation.) Her report was published in 1902. Stevenson begins by saying that "these people are in constant terror of being conjured." She names the sorts of people likely to be involved in sorcery. They are infants, the impoverished, and the physically deformed, along with those who challenge "a prominent member of the tribe." Neither the ensorcelled girl nor the accused sorcerer fit these categories, so far as we are told. The girl was 12; the boy, at most 17. The accusation, thus somewhat outside the usual, is made because, according to Stevenson, the girl's illness must be accounted for. According to Stevenson, she was "hysterical." "A beautiful young girl, about 12 years of age, had suffered for five weeks, the cause being suppression of the menses. She rolled and tossed, pulled at her hair and throat, and threw her arms wildly about, her legs moving as violently as her arms. Her head was never quiet for a moment." According to Stevenson, the patient suffered for 13 days. During that time, the girl's family made inquiries and "learned that on the morning before the attack she was seen romping with a young man, who held her hands, and this was sufficient evidence to bring him before the court for trial" (Stevenson 1904:392-398).

It seems from the family's information that there was a sexual advance and that this precipitated the girl's convulsions. The boy, accused because he was seen holding hands with the girl, "earnestly denied the accusation, declaring that he knew nothing of witchcraft." He was accused, one notes, not of a sexual gesture but of sorcery. The girl, meanwhile, also refused to speak or perhaps was incapable of doing so. "The grandfather appealed to the invalid, begging her to tell all she knew, to talk without fear: 'Hota [granddaughter], tell us.' " These appeals had an effect: "The child, held up by her grandfather told her story with great difficulty in broken sentences. The spasms made it almost impossible for her to articulate, and her head was not still for an instant." She manages to say only a little, but it is enough to incriminate the boy. "When a short distance from my house, this boy wanted me to go with him, and when I refused, he grabbed my hand. As soon as he touched me, I began to tremble, and I ran home." Her parents are certain the boy is at fault. They follow the girl's statement by saying, "And in a short time our child was crazy, as you see her now" (Stevenson 1904:400).

Her parents think the girl is insane, but Stevenson has a different opinion: "The fact is, the child was perfectly rational, but her nervous condition induced them to think her mind was not right" (Stevenson 1904:400). That the girl's parents say she is "crazy" and "think that her mind is not right" in no way makes them believe the girl's account less. This is because what is at stake is not sexual assault, whether it happened or not, but sorcery. If the problem were sexual assault, the girl's coherence would be essential to establish what happened

to her. However, if the girl is "crazy," it is the effect of sorcery, and sexual assault is forgotten. Their minds go directly to the latter possibility and pause not a moment at the girl's experience. "Sorcery" here is not a code word for something sexual. No code word is needed. The sexual dimension is admitted to. The boy, in his first confession, says that he got "love philters." Just as Lévi-Strauss says, the issue is making clear the nature of sorcery—the "truth" of sorcery.

The girl's experience and, in fact, her condition are neglected. The boy confesses that he went to a magician and got love potions. His hearers demand "proof." He produces two roots, presumably given him by the sorcerer. One he claims he used to drive the girl insane; the other will cure her, again according to the boy. He first uses the sort that will drive her insane. It does.

Taking a bite from the root he chewed it, ejected it upon his hands, and rubbed his body. In a moment he distorted his face, spun around, and jumped about; then, shaking his body violently, rushed to the invalid, pulling at her arms and running his hands over them. The spectacle was so harassing that it was with difficulty the writer retained her composure. The child's efforts to scream as she endeavored to release herself from the grasp of her father and brother who held her, her terror each time the boy approached her, the cries of the women, and the tears of the men, except the warriors, who were absorbed in what was going on before them, presented a scene never to be forgotten.

The boy then chews on the second root. This root, instead of restoring the girl to normality, has the same effect as the first. "He swallowed a small quantity of the other medicine and became perfectly rational in his demeanor. He now touched the girl's lips with his own and pretended to draw disease from her heart, while she was almost thrown into convulsions by his touch." The boy clearly does not cure the girl and even makes her worse. At this point, Stevenson intervenes. "The child was in such an alarming condition of nervousness that the writer decided that the farce must end" (Stevenson 1904:402).

Compare this to Lévi-Strauss's statement: "The girl recovers after he [the accused sorcerer] performs his curing ritual" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:169). Lévi-Strauss's assertion is true only in the sense that later (apparently about ten days after the event described) the girl begins to recover. This occurs, according to Stevenson, after she has her period, which happened 13 days after her first onset of trembling. "The patient continued gradually to improve until her health was fully restored" (Stevenson 1904:389). There is no indication that the cure is attributed to the sorcerer; rather, the contrary. Stevenson says that the girl was given "fetishistic medicines" (by whom she does not say), but the failure of the girl to get well led her parents to appeal to Stevenson to help their child. There is no clear sense of a cure at all, nor, if there had been a cure, whether it would have been attributed to Stevenson or to "fetishistic medicines." It certainly seems unlikely that it would have been attributed to the accused sorcerer.

Stevenson intervenes also on behalf of the accused sorcerer. She speaks to the warriors who are acting as judges, and they agree to release the boy on the understanding that on the next morning, two of them would go with him to Stevenson's

camp. The boy, however, runs away—"news which was most gratifying," Stevenson tells us. But they chase after him, bring him back, and retry him.

The renewed trial is the occasion for a new story. The chief judge, Nau'ichi, himself a prominent curer, rejects the accused's first story, saying it is not true. Stevenson does not report why he thinks so. He simply tells the boy, " 'I am here to see that you speak the truth. I shall keep you talking until you do speak the truth' " (Stevenson 1904:403). The judge evidently is not in search of the boy's innocence or guilt. The boy has confessed already; what remains is to make a more convincing confession. Lévi-Strauss does not discuss the trials in detail. His explanation, that the judges want to know the nature of sorcery in particular, that they are in search of the "truth" of sorcery, seems to me to be right. However, it leaves unanswered what this truth is. What is it that is not shown by one story that requires another?

The boy is disheartened. He no longer believes his story is credible.

Losing all faith in winning belief for his story, the wretched boy invented another, which he hoped would satisfy his judge: "Yes, I lied," he tells them. He adds that he did so to protect his parents and his sister who are also witches. "I lied because I loved my father and mother and sister, and did not wish to speak of them."

However, he gives no sign that he thinks he has now betrayed them. On the contrary, acknowledging their involvement sets off a series of boasts in which he identifies himself with them and in which they are made to seem practically omnipotent. He strives for effects to convince them of his power. " All my grandfathers were wizards, ' " he says. To clinch this he adds, " 'I have the plume offerings brought to this world by my witch ancestors. ' " Then he tells them that at the winter solstice witches gather at his mother's house to prevent the rain and snow (Stevenson 1904:403).

One of the warrior judges challenges him. " 'You lie, ' " he says. If it were true, they would have seen the witches gather. But the boy has an answer, one that relies again on a delirium of the possession of power:

Ancient plume offerings held to our hearts and yucca strings crossed over our breasts, while we jump through a hoop made of yucca, empower us to make ourselves into dogs, cats, coyotes, hawks, crows, and owls, so that we pass quickly and unknown about the country. We gather in an inner room of my mother's house where four ancient lamps hang, one on each wall, and by this light we sit and talk and make the rain-makers angry, so that they will not work. I can assume the form of a cat and pass through the smallest hole to enter a house. I can fill my mouth with cactus needles and shoot them through windows and destroy life. I have killed two infants, three girls, and two boys. I have ancient prayer plumes, and I have two others that are used to convert us into other forms than our own. [Stevenson 1904:403]

He boasts of murdering seven people; he lays his parents and his sister open to accusations of the same. If the judges are skeptical, it is not because they want the sort of truth that pertains in our courts. It is not a question of evidence of acts. It is a matter of showing that there actually is a certain power. The boy's

answer to the judges' refusal of his confession is not to make it more plausible (and certainly not to say that he was completely uninvolved or that sorcery is implausible) but to invent more power.

At that point they adjourn to find the plumes. Two walls of the boy's mother's house are torn apart before a plume is found. The first story is designed to fit the facts of the patient's condition. Stevenson notes that before his first confession, "the writer observed that he was closely watching every movement of the girl. It was evident to the writer that the boy had made use of his observations of the girl in weaving his story. and it was a clever thought which prompted him to claim to possess a medicine which would counteract the effect of the other." Thus his story fits hers: he indeed wanted to possess her, and she did indeed tremble after he shook her hand, just as she did during the *séance*. The second story leaves the girl out almost entirely. It is only about sorcery. Sorcery, it is no surprise by now, is power, and power fascinates the warrior judges. During the first confession, "the warriors had become so absorbed by their interest in the narrative of the boy that they seemed entirely to have forgotten the cause of his appearance before them." The girl's experience does not interest them. The obtaining of magical power fascinates them. "In one voice they demanded a manifestation." And this they get as he shows how he made her tremble. We are not told that his failure to cure disappoints them. Only the intervention of Stevenson, trying to prevent further suffering of the girl, puts an end to the first session. Everyone else seems to have forgotten her in favor of wanting to see the sorcerer's power (Stevenson 1904:400-401).

It would be premature to conclude that the truth of sorcery is ever satisfactorily revealed. The boy is taken to his mother's house, and the lock is opened by the warriors, despite the protest of the boy. The boy is set to work. He knocks off the plaster in the first room and finds nothing. The warriors accuse him of lying. He leads them to another room and there finds two packets of ritual plumes. The warriors demand an explanation. He tells them that these plumes are used to destroy the corn crops.

There was consternation among the warriors who exclaimed with one voice, "What does this mean?" Now they felt assured that the youth had spoken the truth.

But the warriors were not to be satisfied until the prayer plumes used to transform the witch into beast form were produced. In despair the boy declared they must be in a room below.

After an hour's search another plume is found in the plaster. This is the feather used to convert witches into animals. The warriors "rejoice." However, "they were not to be satisfied with the one prayer plume; they must have the other." Finally they leave because of the cold and the dust from the shattered plaster (Stevenson 1904:404-405).

Then Stevenson intervenes again. Referring to herself as usual in the third person she says,

She was not sure what Na'uichi [the chief judge]<sup>4</sup> intended to do with the boy, but was determined that the poor fellow should not be hanged. The boy was seated with a warrior on either side of him, and the writer talked to him and doctored him a little, and finally convinced Na'uichi that the boy would never again be able to practice his diabolical art, and that therefore it was not necessary to hang him.

The boy is led to the plaza where there is a crowd. There is silence when they learn the boy is about to speak. "The appetite of the warriors for marvels was not yet satisfied." And the powerful curer, Na'iuchi, tells the boy to confess to the assembled people. He talks on till midnight. The magical objects are placed in front of him. "The people moved in a great wave toward the spot to peer at the mysteries. The longer the boy talked the more absorbed he became in his subject. He added many wonderful statements to those made during the day. At times his face became radiant with satisfaction at his power over his listeners" (Stevenson 1904:405–406).

The truth of sorcery then rests in the demonstration of its miraculous power—not, of course, in the actual workings of it, because this is at best a failure, but in the fabrication of its story with its accompanying artifacts. The boy declares he has lost his power, and they are thus powerless, too. But as he tells his final story, "his face became radiant with satisfaction at his power over his listeners." The equation or the substitutability of linguistic for phallic power is evident. Here is, or, rather, should be, the moment of truth—the moment when his speech puts his experience into the past, or, one could say, makes sorcery into something relatable, taking it out of the deep but vague mystery in which it is assumed to have been embedded.

The boy is increasingly absorbed by his own story, and this story incriminates him. Remember that sorcery earns the death penalty. He would be putting himself to death under ordinary circumstances. Stevenson thought that the boy invented the story of the feathers in order to frighten his accusers with his power. The boy did not confide his intentions to her; she guessed them. However, whether she was right or not, it is evident that there is a mutual interest in the power of accusers and accused that begins before this, with the first confession. Once the boy confesses for the first time, he already is set on the path to the display of magical force, and he tries to use it in his defense when he attempts to cure the girl. Stevenson herself does not think that this strategy will work, judging by what she does later. In any case, it is evident that, as Lévi-Strauss says, the boy's interest in his story puts his interest in saving his life to the side, as all parties find themselves fascinated with power. It remains to be seen, however, if there was an exchange of justice for truth.

In Lévi-Strauss's account, the Zuni love for the truth of sorcery makes them softhearted, and they allow the boy his freedom. However, in Stevenson's story it is different. Stevenson was well known to her rival and comember of the Bureau of American Ethnology expedition to the Zuni, Frank Cushing, for her interference and for calling in the militia, particularly when the Zuni threatened to put a witch to death.<sup>5</sup> Once, before our incident took place, Na'uichi,

the curer and chief judge of the second trial of our sorcerer, was "obdurate" about putting a witch to death. Stevenson tells us this:

He [Na'uichi] was told that the United States government would certainly punish him. He retorted: "I am your friend. Friends do not betray one another. Would you betray me to the soldiers?" "I have not said I would inform upon you," was the reply; "I am too much your friend to wish to see you suffer." "I shall hang this wizard, even though I displease you," he declared. "I shall hang him though the United States Government put me in prison for one month, six months, a year, or forever. He has killed my child, and he must die."

Stevenson finds herself in a dilemma. "The position of the writer was a delicate one. The man must be saved, but she must not make an enemy of a tried friend and one of the men most important to her in her studies" (Stevenson 1904:397). So she arranges a trial of her own, with a warrior judge present. Nai'uchi, the obdurate, the same man who wants to kill our sorcerer, is also present. "The result was that the unfortunate was released. This was brought about by a declaration on the part of the writer that she had deprived the man of his power of sorcery" (Stevenson 1904:397-398).

Very much the same occurs in our case. She takes the boy to her camp along with Na'iuchi. It is after this that the boy is led to the plaza and speaks to the crowd. The boy concludes his oration saying:

While with my mother [this seems to refer to Stevenson], and while she talked to me, I felt my eyes change from black to blue, and then turn from blue to black, and then I felt that all my power of witchcraft was gone, not only for a little while, but for all time. Alas! No more shall I be great among my people. I shall be one of them no more. My power is all gone! All gone forever!<sup>6</sup>

He is then cheered by the crowd. Stevenson concludes: "This incident is mentioned simply to show that it is possible, if these people are managed in the right way, to overcome their miserable superstitions." Management prevails only while the formidable Stevenson remains in Zuni as the manager. It is, she says, only after her departure that the militia actually comes to Zuni. Na'uichi is arrested for hanging a woman accused of witchcraft (Stevenson 1904:406). It seems clear that Na'uichi agreed to let the accused go because of Stevenson's threats of force made acceptable by a face-saving device.

The boy incriminates himself, and he does so before he knows that he will be set free and not, in my opinion, in the hope of being let go. He speaks out of fascination with the story he makes up; his confession is the generation of a conception of power. With it, he captivates his audience. There is a real power of sorcery, in that sense. It remains, unlike the power of curing, unmanageable; He himself is equally captivated. The killing of the sorcerer, which would have been the result in the youth's case without Stevenson, is a futile attempt to bring this power under control. However, after one witch is killed, others emerge.

Mauss says that magic is a form of prejudice. He means that evidence seldom can invalidate magical judgments. The belief in magic is too firm to allow that.

But we see here that the prejudice of magic is not located in belief but in fascination with power. No doubt there must be communal belief for this fascination to occur. In our example, however, we see communal belief generated in the reflection of the boy's story in the minds of his interlocutors and their subsequent insistence that he tell more. At the foundation of the story is indeed something communal, but preceding that there is the heightened sense that the boy knows something and that they do not know quite what it is. The interlocutors function not as judges who examine evidence by standards they have already in mind but as people convinced that there is something to know, that they know who it is that knows it, and that they must find it out themselves. This is the strange prejudice of magic that forbids the finding of innocence, that is, the finding that there is no magic at work and thus nothing to find out. It is a prejudice that stems not from prior belief but from unbearable curiosity and a desire that there be a mighty and uncontrollable power available for them to witness.

We ask again, what is the power of sorcery? The power of curing is the capacity to form a composite voice; the curer speaks for the patient; suffering turns into experience. As Lévi-Strauss explains it, the witch hunt results in the formation of a composite voice as well: The confessing sorcerer speaks for the community; the vague ideas of sorcery turn into explicit and therefore manageable notions. In the end, the community presumably speaks of sorcery as the patient speaks of her suffering—as something gone through and forgettable, at least in the sense that it is no longer remembered involuntarily. However, as described by Stevenson, there is no mastery of this truth. The boy is as fascinated with his story as his accusers. Moreover, as we have seen, this occurs before Stevenson has arranged to save him from hanging. He accuses himself not simply out of desire to please his accusers but to associate himself with the power that has been attributed to him, even if it means that he will be executed. In that sense, he is in its power.

In having a double persona, the sorcerer is like the curer. But the curer, when successful, reintegrates the once-ill person into the community. He thus seems to say that magical power is also social power. The double persona of the curer raises no difficulty; in one incarnation, he or she is the bridge to a world of inspiration drawn on for good. Sorcery is the inversion of this world, but not merely that. As a mere inversion of curing, sorcery would show that the power to cure is also the power to harm. However, via the sorcerer, power, whether to harm or to cure, is also power out of the control of individuals. This goes unnoticed in curing because of its desirable effects. When, in our story, a person incriminates himself, and when the injured party is forgotten, and when, in particular, one sees the process by which stories are fabricated, the nearly autonomous force of language becomes apparent as it merely uses the voice of the accused and as it inhabits the judges, causing them to forget the victim and making them eager to see more and more. The sorcerer, presumably responsible for his deeds, is in fact possessed by language, as are his interlocutors. It remains, then, to show where in language this power is located.

## III

For Lévi-Strauss's own explanation, we have to turn to his *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss* (1987).<sup>7</sup> Lévi-Strauss refers to this passage from Mauss's study of magic:

**The magician, they say, reasons from like to like by applying the law of sympathy, thinking in terms of his powers or his auxiliary spirits. The rite causes the spirits to work, by definition. The magician conjures up his astral body because this body is himself. The smoking of the aquatic plant brings a cloud because it is a cloud. [Mauss 1972:122]**

Lévi-Strauss comments:

**Magical reasoning, implied in the action of producing smoke to elicit clouds and rain, is not grounded in a primordial distinction between smoke and cloud, with an appeal to mana to weld the one to the other, but in the fact that a deeper level of thinking identifies smoke with cloud; that the one is, at least in a certain respect, the same thing as the other: that identification is what justifies the subsequent association, and not the other way round. [Lévi-Strauss 1987:59]**

Lévi-Strauss modifies Mauss by turning to Saussure. I do not mean that he cites Saussure but that he relies on assumptions that are found in Saussure's notion of language. Saussure conceived language as coming into being at a single stroke. The material out of which thought is produced comes together with analogous sound material. All distinctions appear simultaneously as signs when their two parts, signifier and signified, take shape. Lévi-Strauss postulated the existence of one signifier, however, that lacks a corresponding signified. He called this the "floating signifier"; without definite reference, the floating signifier takes on the import of all signification before the latter registers as distinctions. The magical word is the prototypical floating signifier. The original moments of indistinction alluded to above are reached through it. Thus Lévi-Strauss thought that magical thinking simply makes apparent what people already know but know unconsciously or without lucidity (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 55, 62).<sup>8</sup>

Lévi-Strauss's interpretation is bold. Here, however, I want to go back to Mauss's own words. The passage from Mauss above continues: "However we have clearly shown that this reduction to analytical terms is quite theoretical and that things really happen otherwise in the magician's mind. His judgments always involve a heterogeneous term, which is irreducible to any logical analysis." Mauss here refers to the fact he has established that magical judgments are not analytic and in fact function outside logic. The function of magical terms is to conjoin. Specifically, they put together objects that either resemble each other or were once in touch with each other. It is not an error in thinking, as Frazer suggested, that allows them to do so. Rather, the magical term has a power to do so that stems from social belief. "The term is force or power, or *mana*. The idea of magical efficacy is ever present and plays far from an accessory

part, since it enjoys the same status which the copula plays in a grammatical clause. It is this which presents the magical idea and gives it being, reality, truth" (Mauss 1972:122). It is illogical to think that one can act on a red object to affect someone wearing a red shirt. Nonetheless, the belief in magical efficacy allows one to assume it is possible.

As with Lévi-Strauss, for Mauss, language was at the center of the analysis of magic. There was, for him, no magic without language. "Every ritual action has a corresponding phrase, since there is always a minimal representation through which the nature and object of the ritual is expressed, even if this is achieved only through an interior language. It is for this reason that there is no such thing as a wordless ritual." This language was of a specific nature. "The fact that all spells are formulas and that virtually all nonverbal rites also have their formulas shows at once to what degree all magic is formalistic." He goes on to say that "spells are composed in special languages," always foreign to the magicians and their clients (Mauss 1972:57–58).

Formalistic language is close to language without content and thus brings Mauss near to Lévi-Strauss. However, it is not by reference to signifiers, which say everything by their very lack of definite reference, that Mauss proceeds. He finds his path through his comparison between magical words and the function of the copula. What is at stake is the way in which associations are made. Usually we think of them as resulting from suggestions that arise out of similarity. However, in language, we conjoin or associate simply by the power of certain words, in particular, copulas. The prime example of the copula in grammar is the word *is*. *Is*, of course, simply asserts that one thing "is" the other. A statement of this sort seems to state the very terms of an analytical judgment, one in which the attribute of the thing is already contained in the subject: "All bachelors are unmarried." This, one says, is true by definition. The power of definition, however, is first of all linguistic. After that, when we doubt, we subject a sentence with the word *is* to the test of worldly experience. We thus have a synthetic judgment. However, in magic, where the word *is* is magical, such a test has no consequences except to confirm the terms of judgment. For that reason, Mauss speaks of "prejudice." Instead of resisting the illogical and the unnatural, in making magical judgments we validate them. In doing so, we of course confirm the "truth" of the magical word *is* and reject evidence. Such is Mauss's view of magic. For him, the force of magic, in the last analysis, stems as much from language as it does from social belief.<sup>9</sup>

The "truth" of magic is the power inherent in language to conjoin. But this power is not simply present in words; recall that there must be a rite, and a rite is always, in Mauss's thinking, composed of words. The power of magic, then, is a performative power. It is the power to make something true by saying particular words, those that at least sometimes are thought to create truth via their enunciation.

Lévi-Strauss posited the source of power of magical signifiers in his notion of the source of signification. He thus was able to show the relation between magic and the restoration of the ability to represent and, in particular, to

**speak.** For him, the social side of magic consists not only in shared belief in magical signifiers but also in the capacity of magic to restore language to the community. In the face of a traumatic event, one that makes it impossible for the sufferer to meaningfully relate what happened to him, the power to speak is attenuated to the point where language seems without force. The Cuna woman who suffers a difficult childbirth can, perhaps, say what the trouble is, just as the Zuni girl can tell her grandfather what happened to her. But each continues to suffer, and everyone finds the accounts inadequate. It is the moment in which the magician is summoned. He demonstrates the "truth" of sorcery, which is to say, the magical power to make appear something hidden. The community believes in magic, and so he does not demonstrate anything they do not know. However, he has a performative ability they lack at that moment. He becomes their voice; they speak through him and finally are able to do so themselves. Thus the capacity to speak is restored to the community as a whole.

Magical power, that is performative power, is located first in certain words and second, in their proper enunciation by a magician. It is contained in the magician's ability to link together the suffering of the sick woman and the conception of her body contained in the long chant the shaman recites, for instance. The shaman sutures together the painful feelings of the woman and the images of the text. He says, in effect, that "this" (the spirits mentioned in the epic) is "that" (the body of the woman), though this is grossly oversimplified, the chant itself in the case Lévi-Strauss cites containing various kinds of spirits and entities. But as both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss assert, the cure consists in this articulation of two states that results in changing an amorphous state (pain) into one that is relatable.

The capacity of language to say something without regard to the actual state of the world to which it nonetheless refers is essential to magic. The "prejudice" of believers makes it impossible to contradict the statements made by magical articulation. In magic, language "says," and no reference to fact invalidates what it says. Prejudice here is not a disability. On the contrary, it is essential to the power of language to overcome reference. Without prejudice, there is no magic, only disputable fact. Without this prejudice, this refusal to look hard at the world, magic would not disappear; it would be transformed into fiction. One might revise this to say that magic is fiction with power superior to that which language has in places where the institution of literature exists. The institution of literature keeps magical language in a bounded place, at least under ordinary circumstances. The prejudice of magic is an effect of the abnormally forceful capacity of magical language to forge connections. Magical prejudice is not prejudice in the first degree; it is, rather, the effect of a certain superior linguistic power to articulate.

One sees how extreme this power is in the example Lévi-Strauss uses to begin "The Sorcerer and His Magic." So-called voodoo death occurs in various parts of the world. A person is told that he is bewitched. He then suffers and dies. In Australia, aborigines point a bone at the victim in laying this magical curse. Here is an account from Doctor Herbert Basedow who witnessed several cases:

The man who discovers that he is being boned by any enemy is, indeed, a pitiable sight. He stands aghast, with his eyes staring at the treacherous pointer, and with his hands lifted as though to ward off the lethal medium, which he imagines is pouring into his body. His cheeks blanch and his eyes become glassy and the expression of his face becomes horribly distorted. He attempts to shriek but usually the sound chokes in his throat, and all that one might see is froth at his mouth. His body begins to tremble and the muscles twist involuntarily. He sways backwards and falls to the ground, and after a short time appears to be in a swoon; but soon after he writhes as if in mortal agony, and, covering his face with his hands, begins to moan. After a while he becomes very composed and crawls to his wurley. From this time onwards he sickens and frets, refusing to eat and keeping aloof from the daily affairs of the tribe. Unless help is forth coming in the shape of a counter charm administered by the hands of the nangarri, or medicine man, his death is only a matter of a comparatively short time. If the coming of the medicine man is opportune he might be saved. [Cannon 1942:169-181]

Belief causes his death. Belief and not trauma. The person who suffers from trauma repeats the traumatic event in his dreams or in his speech precisely because he cannot believe it. He cannot understand what happened to him even though he can say what it is that occurred. In voodoo death either trauma is not at work or there is a paradox: the man believes what has happened to him and for that reason we might say he is traumatized. "Belief," here, would be used in the sense of "I know there is a catastrophe coming because the magical beliefs of my people say so." Were he traumatized, he might repeat the story of the threat without being about to put himself, the speaker, fully in his own picture. But this is not the case. There is a problem of speech, as we shall see, but it is not one of the difference between the person who utters a sentence and himself as the subject of that sentence. Quite the opposite. He believes he will die. He, the speaker, and he, the subject of the sentence, coincide. Or would coincide if only he could bring himself to utter the words that describe his condition.

The man, we are forced to say, anticipates his death. He is certain of it, and therefore he is in the process of dying. This is all that language allows us to say. It would be paradoxical to say, "The man is dead." He is clinically alive, but he is in a condition analogous to people on life support, around whom there are arguments about whether they are "really" dead even if their hearts still beat. His death has arrived, but he is still present.

A bone has been pointed at this man. Mauss, we repeat, says that magical objects are congealed words and that each rite is a verbal formula, even if it is not pronounced. We can reconstruct the sentence attached to the pointed bone: it is "You will die" or even "You are dead." Belief here consists in accepting the truth of this sentence. The sick man in the case above cannot speak: "He attempts to shriek but usually the sound chokes in his throat, and all that one might see is froth at his mouth." Were he able to speak, he would say either "I will die" or "I am dead." That is, his murder is effected by a logical impossibility, if we accept the latter version. Here, belief consists in the first place of accepting the word *is* as the magical copula. It links "I," the speaker, as the subject of

the predicate, "dead." This is of course heterogeneous, not at all to the rules of grammar but to both analytical and synthetic judgments.<sup>10</sup>

Voodoo death, in that sense, is the contrary of the examples of curing Lévi-Strauss gives even when, in the English, these are referred to as "sorcery." The truth of magic here is still the power to conjoin. It is not, however, a curative power that enables the sufferer to formulate her experience and thus to leave it behind and find a voice again through the voice of the medium, or curer. In voodoo death, the voice of the victim issues from the dead. It does not formulate suffering, changing it into experience. The victim, if he speaks at all, speaks proleptically, anticipating biological death and making death already his own. Though at that point, one might more accurately say "it" rather than "he." The social person is gone; shunned by his fellows. The cursed man, convinced of his death, exists only in anticipating it. "I am dead" in its magical form gives such force to "to be" that its very sense is superceded. The result, according to the testimony above, is that the ensorcelled person cannot speak at all. He cannot pronounce the magical word either because he is already dead from the perspective of the living and so incapable of speech or because, were he to do so, he would be beyond "death" altogether. By this I mean that he would surpass the cultural constructions, particularly ghosts, that are often made to represent the return of the dead. Only a ghost can say and believe, "I am dead." A ghost here would be a cultural form made to accommodate a belief in life after death. The cursed person who says "I am dead" finds no such construction to put on himself. "I am dead" thus remains for him an impossible sentence. And yet it is linguistically possible, and it is culturally possible, once there is the power of magic that ensures that a comparison with reality does not avail. The most powerful of all magical words is, thus, qua magical word, under certain circumstances, unspeakable.

The magical signifier bends reality. It links what cannot conceivably be conjoined. The signifier that cures conjoins and is speakable. It brings about the possibility of speech. The magical signifier that kills remains unspeakable. It fascinates and is coveted, but finally those in whom it is lodged are shunned, expelled, murdered. It is why the sorcerer's confession is inadequate to the needs of his accuser. He gets no reprieve (in the Zuni case he was, we have seen, rescued by Stevenson, backed by the United States cavalry). There is, in this case, no coherence. What produces speech also produces delirium. There is no complete control of this element. Therefore, once the witch is killed, another one is hunted.

Demonic possession, said Freud (1962), was hysteria before it was interiorized in neurosis. Indeed, witchcraft resembles hysteria in that something is said that under ordinary circumstances would not be said. More accurately, witchcraft is a failure of hysteria because hysteria is a compromise formation in which a symptom is formed that allows a forbidden wish to surface without being recognized. It is hidden under another form, except for a point of resemblance. Magic, by contrast, knows no compromise. It links anything with anything, even if the result is catastrophe. From this point of view, the man cursed

in voodoo death dies of an anxiety that knows no compromise and, therefore, surpasses all forms of expression.

There is excessive power in sorcery. It articulates, but "articulate" has at least two senses. One is "to conjoin"; the other is "to speak." In curing, both are present; in sorcery, only the first. There is conjunction or association without speech being in the control of the speaker. The origin of the power of sorcery is not the person. It is, if one can speak in the singular at all, neither language as such, in the Sausurrian sense, nor speech, but a place suggested by the string of articulations that never end and, thus, suggests a source without ever being able to represent it. Finally, one can never say, "This is what he meant" or "This is what he did" in a definitive way. Thus the admission of sorcery by the Zuni youth required another admission, and the finding of magical objects meant more objects had to be found. No story and no object adequately expressed magical power.

It is exactly this lack of a single place of origin that makes social and political authority interested. Their own claims to religious or supernatural valorization are challenged. Such claims depend on a fixed pantheon of supernatural beings, each definable and associated with particular tales and powers of intervention in human life. By contrast, in sorcery there is something they cannot grasp themselves, and they cannot grasp it even with the help of all the witches they hang (whose force they nonetheless recognize).

An absolute power of articulation is intolerable. Lévi-Strauss would like to say that in the process of the witch's confession he discovers the social origins of communication, as well as its truth—that is, the possibility of communicating at all. But in fact, it displays the contrary. The sorcerer addresses the community, is executed, and later is replaced by another, also to be executed. He shows how the full power of speech does not ensure social acceptance in exchange for "truth" but exceeds the social and finds its source in forbidden places that remain, if not outside communication altogether, certainly on its margins.

Sorcery, then, is not an example of enormous phallic power filling in a fixed lack that, once established, assures normal speech. It is, rather, a matter of an excessive power pointing not to a place but to places from which nothing acceptable can issue. That such a power fascinates and is phallic is certain. But it is not phallogocentric; the power of sorcery is not under centralized control; the sorcerers' magic arises not in a fixed center but in obscure and seldom visited places. The words of sorcery are thus eccentric by comparison both to normal speech and to those of magical curing.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that language may not be organized in a phallic manner in most if not all human societies. But that does not mean that all possibilities are exhausted. The witch hunt is the attempt to close these possibilities.

"The youth, who at first was a threat to the physical security of his group, became the guardian of its spiritual coherence" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:168). It would only be true if, first of all, there had been an exchange of truth for justice. This was not the case. It would be true if occult power were transformed

into literature and narrative satisfied the fascination with the production of all possibilities. But literature never replaced sorcery in the Zuni world of the time of Stevenson and witches continued to be hanged. In the end, however, this particular youth did communicate; Stevenson recorded his words; Lévi-Strauss read them; and we read them today. Does this show that he was at the source of communication—or only “a” source? If the Zuni sorcerer continues to speak to us, it is, finally, because, like the Zuni, we, too, want to know the possible sources of articulation outside those already established. This might be the “truth” of sorcery if there is one. We moderns cannot deny such sources exist, but in our theories, like Lévi-Strauss, we unjustly try to unify them. Finally, we can say, there is no “finally;” we only add our stories to others that travel across borders of all sorts.

### Notes

1. I am thinking in particular of the work of Peter Geschiere; and Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, and their students. See Geschiere 1997 and Comaroff and Comaroff 1993. See also Niehaus 2001 and the literature cited there.

2. The passage continues:

The defendant, who serves as a witness, gives the group the satisfaction of truth, which is infinitely greater and richer than the satisfaction of justice that would have been achieved by his execution. And finally, by his ingenious defense which makes his hearers progressively aware of the vitality offered by his corroboration of their system (especially because the choice is not between this system and another, but between the magical system and no system at all—that is, chaos), the youth, who at first was a threat to the physical security of his group, became the guardian of its spiritual coherence.

3. Stevenson tells us that the chief curer gave her the plume to give to the president of the United States as proof that there are witches in Zuni. They assumed, of course, that anyone would be convinced by such proof. They had a motive in making this gift. The U.S. government tried to suppress the killing of witches. If the United States was given evidence that witches really exist, it would stop suppressing the Zuni authorities who controlled witches. The Zuni gift, meant to show that witches exist, was no doubt also a plea for allowing their extermination (Stevenson 1904:173).

4. Stevenson sometimes spells this name as above, sometimes as Nai'uchi.

5. For the interesting relations between Stevenson and Cushing, see the remarks of Jesse Green, the editor of Cushing's correspondence (Green:7 and 350 n. 31).

6. Mary Pratt pointed out to me that the changing of the color of the boy's eyes from black to blue to black again indicates a relation between sorcery and colonial power. I believe this to be correct but to follow it through at the moment would divert us from the main point of the article. I would add only that the Zuni interest in killing witches may well have been an effect of the presence of U.S. military power, which diminished Zuni authority and thus may have led to an urge to reassert it on the backs of accused witches and before that, to their sensitivity to sources of power other than their own. I thank Pratt for her remark.

7. This translation of Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction* is published separately from the essays of Mauss that Lévi-Strauss introduces.

8. The important passage from Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction* is this:

Man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or "inadequation" between the two, a non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signified to which it can be fitted. [Lévi-Strauss 1987:62]

Lévi-Strauss comments that this is true of humanity in general, not merely in places where magic is practiced. Rather, "in our society, these notions have a fluid, spontaneous character." He gives the examples of *oomph* in American and *truc* and *machin* in French. The latter can stand for a range of objects not defined in advance of the word, whereas elsewhere, "they serve as the ground of considered, official interpretive systems; a role, that is to say, which we ourselves reserve for science" (1987:55).

9. You will notice the congruence of Mauss's formulation with Freud's statement that the unconscious knows no negative: "Dreams have no means of expressing the relation of a contradiction, a contrary or a 'no' " (Freud 1965:361). Instead, "dreams show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or representing them as one and the same" (1965:353). Negation in dreams could hinder the wish on its way to expression. A similar (il)logic is implied in magic. Nothing prevents the expression of statements that, if they were not magic, would be untrue (1965:353). Freud later showed that dreams did have ways of expressing contradiction indirectly (1965:372).

10. I, of course, do not mean to say that the magical word of any society is necessarily translatable outside of its magic usage by the English word *is*. I mean to argue, rather, as Mauss says, that the function of the magical word is the same as that of the copula. If we had to translate the word in the context of magical usage, we would thus have to say "is," no matter what the meaning of this word or words in other contexts. Whatever it might be, in magical usage, the magical signifier means "is." It has also to be kept in mind that Mauss said that magical words were often from languages foreign to the place where they were used, implying that their sense was unknown and that in any case, they were formulaic, meaning that their form was important while their particular sense was disregarded. It is again a question of effecting a linkage, thus acting as the word *is* acts and so requiring us, in that context, to translate the word or words as *is*. Though even this translation is inadequate if I am correct in what I say in the paragraph that follows.

11. One can object that I am confounding culturally grounded examples against the universal category of language, which is to say that magical power is always linguistic and derives its force from within language. Given that, the idea of the floating signifier includes both the language of sorcery and of curing. However, they remain distinct. The magical words that Lévi-Strauss interprets as floating signifiers are, as he says, vague in their reference. But as he points out, they have a defined place. "They serve as the ground of considered, official interpretive systems; a role, that is to say, which we ourselves reserve for science." By contrast, the equivalent words in a society without the institutions of magic are, in the French case, *truc* or *machin*, which we might translate as "thing," and which have referents undefined in advance. Their very power to cause signifieds to appear make them equivalents of magical words. The language of sorcery is different. It has a power of reference that never produces particular signifieds at all but that instead points to always different sources of itself that, so long as there is sorcery, remain uncontrollable. To equate these sources with *language*, the general term, is both correct and incorrect. It is correct to the extent that sorcery is a linguistic phenomenon. But it is incorrect because the nature of that phenomenon is not necessarily to be a closed system such that the very nature of significations requires a consolidated system of signifiers on the one hand and a single source for them on the other. As Jacques Derrida has pointed

out in many different ways, the idea of a closed system whereby the lack that is in every signifier, that is filled in by its reference and in general filled in by a singular place of reference, is tied to speech and ignores the written qualities of language that surpass this system while being necessary to it.

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